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WHEN THE CHILD IS ANGRY.
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NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSN., WASHINGTON, D.C.
REPORT NUMBER NEA-282-08824
EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC NOT AVAILABLE FROM EDRS. 6P.

DESCRIPTORS- *CHILDREN, *STUDENT TEACHER RELATIONSHIP, *SELF EXPRESSION, HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, CHILD DEVELOPMENT, EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT, EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE, *EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT, PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT, ANXIETY, AGGRESSION, *PSYCHOLOGICAL PATTERNS, SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT, TEACHER ROLE,

THE ABILITY TO HAVE AND EXPRESS FEELINGS IN THE YOUNG CHILD IS CLOSELY LINKED TO BODILY FUNCTIONS AND MOVEMENTS. AS HE GROWS, HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS GIVE MEANING AND DIRECTION TO THE EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS. AGGRESSION AND ANGER ARE EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS THAT ARE RELATED BUT NOT IDENTICAL. AGGRESSION MAY BE ROOTED IN ANGER, BUT IT POSITIVE SENSE, IT ENABLES THE CHILD TO USE HIS ENVIRONMENT FOR SATISFACTION OF ESSENTIAL NEEDS. THE CHILD DEVELOPS A CAPACITY FOR CONSTRUCTIVE OR DESTRUCTIVE AGGRESSIVE ACTION AND FEELINGS FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERACTING WITH OTHERS. THIS INTERACTION WITH OTHERS IS ALWAYS ASSOCIATED WITH SOME DEGREE OF FRUSTRATION. FRUSTRATION IS A CONTROL IMPOSED ON AN INDIVIDUAL THAT BLOCKS SATISFACTION OF A PHYSICAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL NEED. UNLESS THIS FRUSTRATION IS OVERLY SEVERE, IT BECOMES A CONSTRUCTIVE FACTOR, TEACHING THE CHILD TO ASSERT HIMSELF. A CHILD'S CAPACITY TO TOLERATE FRUSTRATION CAN BE GREATLY REDUCED BY HUNGER, INSECURITY, PHYSICAL ILLNESS OR FEAR. ANGER CAN BE AGGRESSIVE, BUT IT CAN ALSO BE PASSIVE. A CHILD STRIKING ANOTHER CHILD MAY BE NOT MORE ANGRY THAN A CHILD REFUSING TO LEARN HIS LESSON. IT MAY TAKE ALL A TEACHER'S TOLERANCE AND UNDERSTANDING TO WORK WITH AN ANGRY CHILD. THIS DOCUMENT IS AVAILABLE FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY-KINDERGARTEN-NURSERY EDUCATION, NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, 1201 SIXTEENTH STREET, N.W., WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036. (CO)

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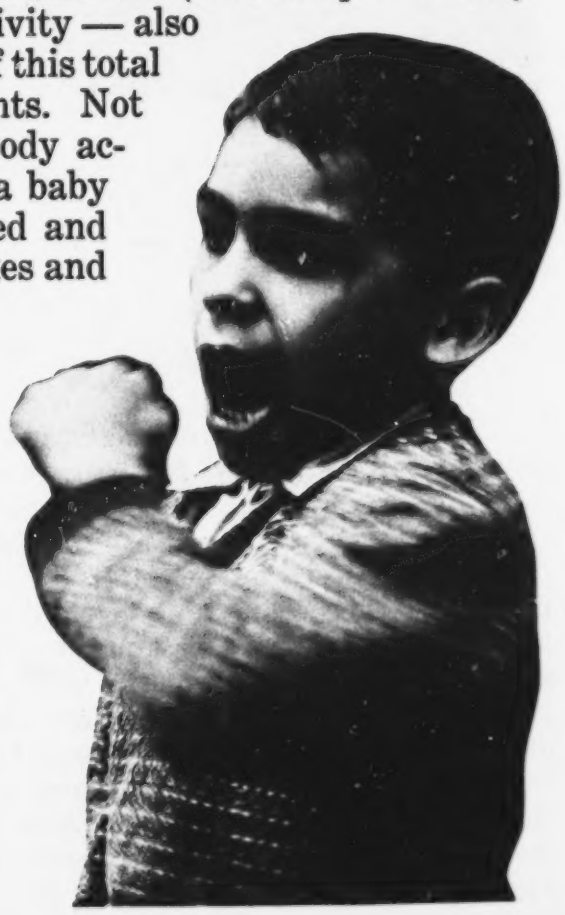
Anger makes people uncomfortable—and, for most, it matters little whether it is their own anger or that of someone else. Throughout the school year, elementary teachers are faced with a great variety of angry reactions in children. Most of the episodes are mild, transient, and quickly forgotten. Occasionally, however, the entire class is seriously upset and learning stops. The purpose of this discussion is not only to help teachers to be more comfortable with angry children but also to stimulate them to discover more constructive ways of dealing with this universal and complicated human feeling.

The Development of Feelings

First of all, I would like to outline how feelings in children grow and develop. Although we usually think of feelings in psychological terms, in this instance let us include the biologic as well as the psychic roots and describe *feeling* as the sense of "aliveness" experienced when an animal reacts as an integrated whole.

Detailed studies of living organisms have brought out some important facts and theories about the nature and process of growth and development. A very crucial point is that in the very beginning the human organism responds as a totality. In the infant, we see the organism reacting with his whole being to both external and internal stimulation. (The complementary behavior — the inhibition of patterns of activity — also occurs as a *total reaction.*) A clear example of this total functioning is seen in the behavior of infants. Not only does the hungry baby cry, his entire body actively expresses his discontent. And, when a baby falls asleep, we are impressed with the speed and completeness with which his whole body relaxes and grows limp.



With the child, the capacity to have and to express feelings is a function of the entire child and is very much linked to bodily functions and movements. Indeed, in the infant, feeling is primarily expressed through the body. As the child matures, the total expressive pattern begins to break up into partial patterns, and attentive mothers soon begin to recognize differences between cries of hunger or pain or discomfort. At the same time, there is a gradual separation of feelings from total body functions and a parallel association of the emerging feelings with more limited, but also more

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distinct, patterns of bodily movement and physiologic functioning. Parents come to recognize that certain movements or body positions are linked with fairly specific feeling states.

The Role of Feelings

It is very important to understand that feelings have a critical role in the growth and development of an individual. The capacity to feel opens the door to the possibility of distinguishing between the "self" and the "not-self." This awareness of difference is so important that psychological development cannot progress very far—if at all—without it. One of the most striking findings in seriously disturbed individuals is the great difficulty they have in distinguishing between their own body and the detached world around them. In normal development, there is a progressive divorce of vital bodily functions from total association with emotional reactions. It is not unusual for an infant to vomit under the stress of some frustration or pain. However, by the time a child reaches school age, the intestinal tract no longer carries the major share of affective expression but sticks to its more appropriate task of digesting food.

Growth and development—whether physical, emotional, or intellectual—*requires* a very active interplay between the child and the world around him. The teacher is an external force that can have great impact on the internal life of the child. Therefore, it is extremely important that the teacher recognize that the quality of his relationship with a child has a great significance for the child's intellectual development. Within a relationship characterized by mutual respect, freedom, and a willingness to be "open," there is much opportunity for positive growth.

How do human relationships enter into the process of growth? One important function is that of giving *meaning* and *direction* to the expression of feelings by the child. Without a context, without a purpose, the expression of feeling can be little more than the release of pent-up energy, a process that leaves the child basically unchanged: Nothing new has been learned and added to the individual. It would be like a classroom in which each day the class repeated yesterday's lesson plan!

Anger vs. Aggression

Before anything we say about anger will make much sense, we have to consider the notion of "aggression." Anger and aggression are related, yet they are not identical. Anger can be aggressive, but it can also be passive. A child striking another child may be no more angry than a youngster stubbornly refusing to learn his lesson. Aggression may be rooted in anger, but it might just as easily stem from fear—even love. To be constructive in dealing with angry children, it is important to try to understand at least the more important facts relating to aggressiveness, anger, and their interactions.

In everyday usage, the word *aggression* emphasizes the negative: to attack, to destroy. Basically, however, the meaning of the word is positive. *To aggress* means *to move toward.* We must not let the negative side of aggression keep us from understanding the central and profound role it plays in the growth and maturation of a human being. Aggression is a fundamental property of all living organisms and enables living creatures to reach out and utilize the environment for satisfaction of essential needs. In the child, the capacity for aggressive action makes it possible for him to *actively participate* in his own growing up.

In the infant, aggression has an unorganized, undirected quality. But from the experience of actively interacting with others, sustained and influenced by the responses and feelings he arouses in others, the child develops a capacity for constructive or destructive aggressive action and feeling. A child can assert himself against the demands made upon him, or he can yield to them. Through this active interplay with others, the child can become both an individual and, by relinquishing some of his individuality, a member of his family and society.

Frustration

This interaction with others, this impact on a counterforce, is *always* associated with some degree of frustration. *Frustration* is used in the sense of a control or limit imposed on an individual that delays or blocks the urge to satisfy a physical or psychological need. Unless the frustration is overly severe or prolonged, it can become a constructive factor in the growth and development of the child. Without some frustration, there would be no awakening of the will to assert one's self, to test out one's capacity to deal with what life brings along. Frustration, in its positive forms, is essential to the child's psychological awakening. If the infant never experienced hunger because of a slight delay in feeding, he would not be able to gradually learn that he is separated from his mother and that there are things *he can do* to get his hunger satisfied. The infant *needs* a period of having his wants satisfied in accordance with his own rhythms. As he grows, he learns to adjust to the rhythms of the world around him—but *only* if he has experienced original satisfactions and continues to experience new satisfactions.

A child learns, in the normal experience of growing up, that he cannot always have what he wants and demands. He will try to override some of these controls, and the resultant aggressive reactions acquire the negative overtones of anger, resentment, and defiance. Younger children, especially, assume that others are intuitively aware of their needs and experience any frustration as an act of aggression toward them. Even something as mild as restricting mobility can be felt as an attack.

To be constructive, frustration must be appropriate in terms of necessity, intensity, and manner of imposition. When limitations are too confining or autocratic, or when the child is not helped to express the feelings aroused by the controls, or when the limits melt away before the child's inappropriate demands, then the frustration merely cancels out the child's reactions

and prevents the development of more differentiated, purposeful, and constructive aggression. A child who is treated unfairly, harshly, or in such a way that he cannot work out the feelings provoked by controls often will become a resentful and negative person. One who gets his way when he should not develops a fear of his own anger and misses out on much valuable social learning. The continuing sympathy and support of others make it possible for the growing child to become, through his own experiences (even quite frustrating ones), an individual in his own unique way.

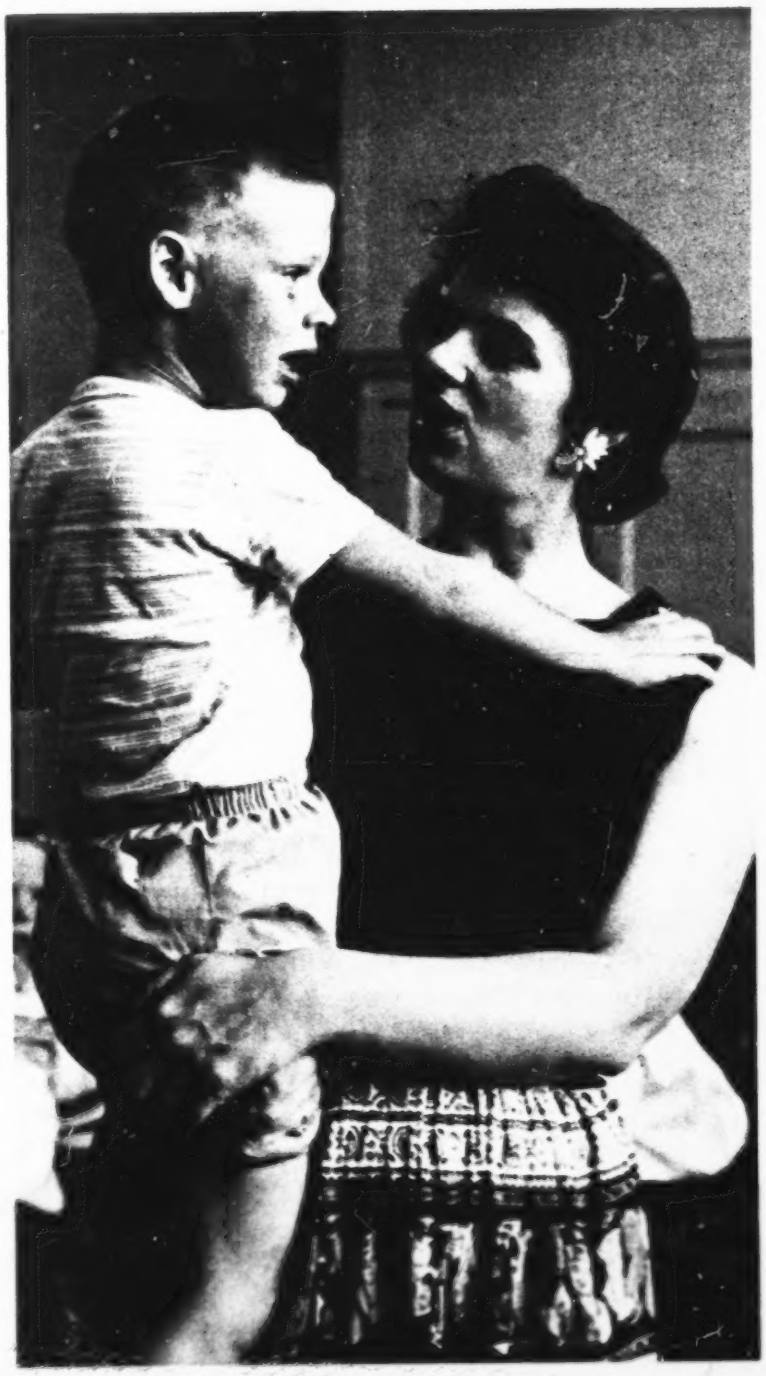
Anger in the Classroom

Now, let's confront the issue of the angry child in a school setting. Rather than cite specific cases and ways of handling them, I would prefer to help the teacher develop a *way of looking at the situation* based on general principles and leave him the freedom and opportunity to work out individual and creative solutions.

We can look at a child's anger as an expression, not only of a feeling, but of an unmet need and the attempt of the child to satisfy that need. A particular angry child represents an individual with unique biologic endowments—a body in a certain physiologic state and acquired patterns of action and feeling. The teacher needs to remember that all of these factors are involved in dealing with a particular episode of anger and that it is not always obvious which is the most important at that moment.

Now, it is certainly not possible for a teacher to stop teaching and analyze every angry outburst or negative behavior. It is possible, however, for a teacher to deal more understandingly and effectively with children on the basis of a knowledge of common factors that cause anger. With this knowledge, the teacher can arrange the classroom situation in a way that will prevent or minimize the expression of negative aggression.

First, we know that there are certain deeply rooted biologic needs which tend to raise the level of internal "tension," which then seeks release through aggression. Usually, aggression is relieved by such harmless, positive activities as active play, laughter, shouting, singing. When a child is deprived of these natural and constructive releases, the dammed-up aggression is experienced as an increased irritability and restlessness which frequently leads to easily aroused anger and negative behavior. Children differ in terms of the level of tension they can handle, but to some degree all are made more irritable and less available for constructive schoolwork by a lack of aggressive activity planned to meet their biologic needs.



Another factor that contributes to increased "aggressive tension" is crowding. What degree of closeness constitutes crowding is a relative matter and differs with the kind of children involved, the type of activity in progress, even how well the children know the teacher and each other. We have all experienced the strong need to get off by ourselves to keep from expressing strong anger inappropriately. And, many times, we are unable to explain why we are so irritable. The answer is often veiled in as yet unexplained biological needs and rhythms.

Territoriality may not sound familiar as a factor in anger. However, if you compare your state of mind when walking at night in your own neighborhood with how you feel—even in the daytime—on a strange street, you will recognize how much more relaxed, secure, and aggressive you feel in your own "territory" than in an unfamiliar situation, where you are overalert, tense, and at times a bit suspicious and somewhat fear-

ful. At least at first, school is "strange" territory to many children, and frequent changes in routine, personnel, or physical arrangements will heighten irritability and promote expression of negative aggression.

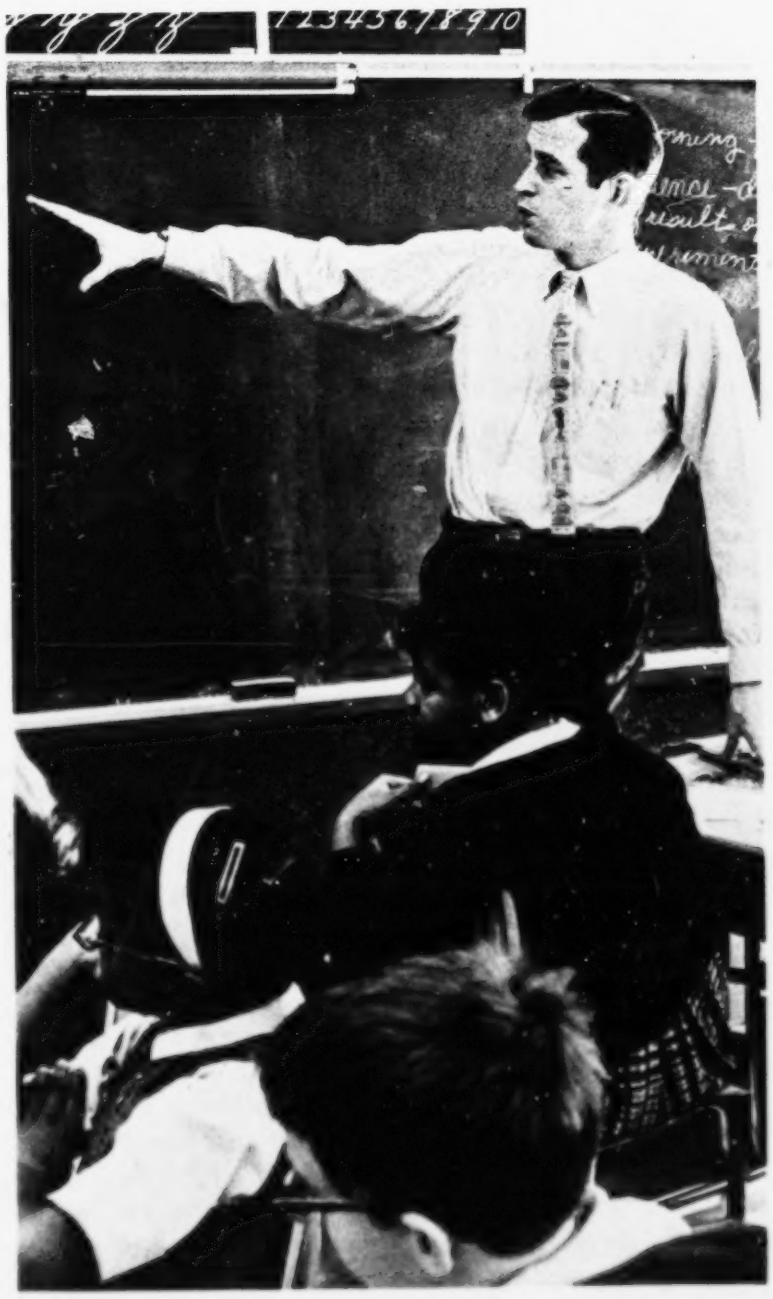
Much of the aggressivity and negative competitiveness that flourish between children who are strangers or in some sort of "pecking order" (e.g., age, athletic or academic skill) can be diminished by promoting friendly contacts and involvement in constructive, cooperative activities.

Although more easily understood, physiological stresses are often neglected when trying to deal with irritable children. Fatigue, mild pain or hunger, physical illness of a subtle nature—all of these can lower the threshold for negative aggression so that quite ordinary situations will provoke strong and inexplicable outbursts of temper. Although uncommon in the average classroom, such psychological states as chronic worry, feelings of helplessness, and fear can reduce a child's capacity to tolerate even minimal frustrations to nearly zero. In schools serving socially and economically deprived neighborhoods, these factors are common. Teachers should not be surprised at the great difficulty involved in helping children who chronically experience such severe stresses. Punishment for aggression at home, especially severe punishment by the mother, is often accompanied by serious behavior problems at school.

Handling Anger

Patterns of aggression and ways of dealing with frustrations are learned, first of all, at home; later on, from the culture in which a child grows up. Hyperactivity, overeating, stubbornness, provocativeness, and physical violence are some of the ways children learn to express their anger. Some of the ways are obviously not very constructive. In fact, some are quite destructive in terms of personality development and social functioning. The inexperienced child, however, is not able to develop—to consistently develop—positive patterns of handling anger in opposition to the example of his family and the pressures from his peer group. Harsh suppression and moralizing are particularly ineffective ways of modifying negative behavior and can be destructive when the child's behavior is supported at home and in the neighborhood. At best, the aggression goes "underground"—for a while—only to break out again unexpectedly and with even greater force. If the child senses the teacher to be a friendly person who accepts him as he is, then, and only then, will he consider using alternative, more constructive ways of expressing anger. The more subtly and inconspicuously the teacher's "alternatives" are advanced, the more likely it is that the child will respond positively. Without exception, the positive personal example of the teacher goes the farthest in winning affirmative and generous acceptance by the pupil.

Most teachers know of the value of helping children express and channel feelings through games, playacting, storytelling, singing, exercising, and similar activities. I would only add that they are probably not used as much as they should be nor as deliberately as our knowledge would indicate. A child's sharing of a feeling with someone else, whatever the method, is an opportunity to better understand and become more responsible for his own feelings and the feelings of others. Overactive, troublesome children are often very anxious and fearful. Some teachers provide opportunities for them to share fears. It's true that many children are ashamed to admit worries and anxieties publicly, but a class might respond quite openly to a game of "What are things to be afraid of?" A sensitive and creative teacher could turn such a group experience into a growth experience for children who might otherwise continue to practice negative ways of dealing with fearfulness. When



children show too much readiness to hurt physically, perhaps letting them share with others the care of living things will permit their tender feelings to grow stronger and even may transform their cruelty into concern for the feelings of others.

An angry child feels hurt and wants to hurt in return. The teacher must do his best to alleviate *both* hurts. The child must not be allowed to irretrievably or severely harm living creatures, nor even senselessly mistreat material things. Such behavior rebounds on the child either by making him suffer from justified guilt or, worse, become more insensitive and cruel. As for the child's pain—the hurt that spurred his wish to hurt someone else—this cannot be abolished. But by helping the child express the feeling and to share that hurt—to whatever degree he is ready and able to do so, the teacher will have helped to start the healing process.

And, the healing will come less from what the teacher says than from that profoundly moving human experience in which the child recognizes that he is *understood* and, in return, *understands* that his teacher, too, has faced pain, felt anger, and accepted responsibility by not shifting the burden of his own pain and bringing more pain to others.

Summary

The ideas developed above will bear fruit only if they become a part of the teacher through experience and reflection. They must be integrated into the teacher's spontaneous responses to children. No teacher will ever know the totality of the biological, physiological, and psychological determinants of anger in a specific child. Certainly the child is not very clearly aware of even a part of those great forces which affect him. He has no choice but to grapple with them as he faces the challenges and frustrations of living. Knowing this, how can a teacher not wish to lend all of his strength, tolerance, and understanding?

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